

Have you had that moment in your life yet where you're just not sure what's going to happen next? And I don't mean in the good, exciting, anything's possible kind of way. I mean in the depressing, all paths are shut and there's nowhere to go, kind of way. Everything seems hopeless and lost and there's nothing that can really be done about any of it. All the obstacles stand in your way and every one of them seems insurmountable. If you've ever been there, it can be a tough place to be. But God is here to remind us today that as Christians, that is not a state we ever need to be in.

<Read text: 2 Tim 4:6-8, 16-18>

The apostle Paul had been given a clear, direct mission from God. He had been one who tormented believers. He had to do all he could to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. He chased them down in towns all around the area, he imprisoned them whenever he could and he gave his approval to their deaths. But God did not want even this man to die for his crimes, and so God rescued him. And showing Paul the mercy that he had for him, he then gave him a charge. "Take this message that has rescued you and bring it to the whole world. It's not just for the Jews, bring it to all the Gentile nations." God would teach him what he needed to know, and it was his charge to teach it to everyone he could wherever he went.

And even though it was a directive of God, one he was compelled to obey, he still did it joyfully. He went out gladly on several missionary trips simply for the purpose of telling people about their savior. He knew what it was like to be without that knowledge. He knew what would have happened to him if God had not come to him to change things. He knew what it would mean to these people to hear about Jesus. And most importantly, he knew as he went that he had God on his side. God who had forgiven him his sins, and promised him eternal life on the blood of Jesus. Knowing his God, knowing what waited for him at the end allowed Paul to go forward with a kind of fearless resolve and confidence that we still look at with awe and respect.

But from all outward appearances, it would seem that Paul's confidence was misplaced. He got some people to listen to him, eventually, sure. But he also encountered severe resistance to the truth he was trying to teach. Oftentimes when he arrived in a town he would go first to the Jews, explain to them how Jesus was the Christ they had been waiting for and expecting. And surprisingly enough, they would usually listen. But then after a while, the Gentiles in the town would start to come listen to, and Paul would talk to them on equal terms with the Jews. And the Jews got jealous. On more than one occasion he was run out of town, beaten, stoned and left for dead.

And in fact, at the time of this writing, Paul expected the end to be coming soon. He was waiting in prison for an execution that he knew was coming soon. He had given his best years to God's service, and here we was in chains waiting to be put to death for his effort. God had not made him wealthy or powerful, had not spared him all pain and suffering. He was, arguably, one of the best earthly servants God ever had, and this was the result that was given him.

Except it wasn't, was it? And Paul knew exactly what was happening to him. He fought the good fight, he finished the race laid before him and he knew what was waiting for him at the end. Through the forgiveness in Christ's blood, an eternal paradise was waiting for him to enjoy. The Lord, the righteous Judge, was going to award him a crown of righteousness. Not his own righteousness, but a righteousness given to him. He would not only be clean in God's eyes and fit for entry into heaven, but he would become the person he had always wanted to be. Paul had felt the pain of his sin very thoroughly since his conversion. He knew the good he wanted to be doing but he just could not manage to do it. Rather, as he struggled with his sinful nature, the sin won out. This was the true burden on his life, not the assaults from without but the pain from within that he couldn't serve his God as well as he wanted. This would be removed from him. He would be at peace with himself, able to finally live God's will at all times in a kingdom of glory.

Paul understood the larger perspective of his life and the lives of everyone he met. This wasn't all there was for him. Or for anyone else. God promised him a home in heaven, nothing was going to change that, and so what happened to him in the here and now until then did not matter in the slightest. God had already rescued him from the worst there was, his own sin. And in due time, God would take him home to heaven to be completely free. In the meantime, whatever the personal cost, Paul devoted himself to the mission God gave him: to speak the gospel to others. If he did not speak, they could not know the truth and they could not be saved. It was not his fault if they didn't listen, if they rejected God. But he would speak the truth at any cost, because he could afford it. Nothing could be spent or lost that would change the eternity waiting for him. Nothing would cause him to lose the forgiveness God had granted him. He trusted the Lord to rescue him. And so to him, there were no dark hours, there were no hopeless days. He had the love of his God, and that was more than enough.

Paul is not unique to Christians in this pattern. We all have been given directives from our God. We all have outward difficulties that try to get in the way. And we all can have a better perspective on it all. Our mission from God is the same general mission that Paul had, just not quite as specific as his. We have the great commission given to the new testament church before Jesus ascended into heaven. We are to go into the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them God's word. Of course that means at the same time we who have been baptized are to learn God's word. So there you have it, not much different than what Paul was called to do. We are to take the word into the world and we ourselves are to grow in the word.

And we have the same reasons for carrying this out that Paul did. We have been rescued from death. On our own, in our sinful natures, we have committed crimes against God that must be punished. The deeds are done, there's no amount of apologizing or promises to do better that change that fact. There has to be justice. And by all rights, it should have to come at our expense. But we know it didn't. We know that just like Paul, Jesus' blood covers our wrongs as well. His sacrifice pays our debt. On our own we drown, but the Lord has rescued you. That same rescue that gave Paul his motivation is what gives us the reason to act. Our actions do not make us saved, but our rescue is what causes us to act.

Because like Paul, we understand where we have been, and we understand where we would be without our God. And so we understand also that translates to all the people we know and meet. Those who don't know Christ are trapped in their sins. They will die unless something changes. They need to have God change their hearts like he changed ours. And to do that, we need to speak, we need to teach. We can, because we understand we have nothing to lose. Our God gives us everything we need. He is on our side as we go, and so there is nothing we need to be afraid of. We can go and speak with zeal and confidence, just like Paul. This is our race. This is our good fight.

And like Paul, the world will try to discourage us. The devil cannot stand for people to hear this truth and so he does everything he can to slow us down, stop us and make us give up. He'll pile on the pressure as much as he can. People will get angry when we try to teach them about the truth. We'll be ridiculed for holding to such obviously false ideas. Our own culture goes out of its way to make us seem intolerant and hateful so that we are pressured into hiding who we really are.

And these are to say nothing of simply the trials of life. Living in a world corrupted by sin produces pain and suffering without it even being intentionally directed against us. We get sick, we get old and weak. Natural disasters and accidents take away what we once treasured. Day in and day out it can seem like we struggle without a point, like nothing ever improves and no progress is ever made. All of these pressures of Satan come at us to press us down to the point where we feel there is no hope left, nowhere to turn and no options open to us. To try to get us to feel that there's no point in going on.

But we never have to feel that way. We have the truth that kept Paul going in the worst of his life. The truth of a risen savior whose blood cleanses us all, who has rescued us from our sins and will rescue us at the end of our lives here for eternal life in heaven. We will, just like Paul, be granted that crown of righteousness at the end. The worst pain we have, the sin living within us, will be cut out, and we will be free to live our lives devoted to God without ever letting him or ourselves down again. This is the joy we look forward to. Nothing that happens to us now changes that outcome. Nothing can hurt us so much that it kills us forever. There is no pain so severe that it's worth giving up our eternity over. That is what we look to in distress, that is our hope and our comfort. That these trials will not last and our Lord will rescue us from them.

Whenever we focus on the here and now, whenever we focus on just ourselves, that's when we risk losing hope. But remember Paul. No matter how dark things appeared on the outside, he knew and held to the truth. He had a risen savior who paid his sins. Life here was simply a way to show appreciation for what God had done for him, no matter the trials in between. Death was only a gateway. He knew what was waiting for him and as he ran, as he fought, he kept his eyes on the prize promised him. Keep your eyes there too and you will have hope in all circumstances. A sure hope that no matter what comes here and now, the Lord will rescue you. Amen.